Making More Wikipedias

Wikimedia 2006 Elections

If you translate this essay, please contact me.

Vote for me in the election for the Wikimedia Foundation's Board of Directors.

Maybe it's just me, but it seems like everywhere you look people are trying to get a piece of Wikipedia. Wikis sites have been started in every field from the Muppets to the law. The domain Wiki.com recently was sold for 3 million dollars. Professor Cass Sunstein, previously seen arguing the Internet could tear apart the republic, just published a new book arguing tools like wikis will lead us to "Infotopia". So is it possible to replicate Wikipedia's success? What's the key that made it work?

Unfortunately, this question hasn't gotten the attention it deserves. For the most part, people have simply assumed that Wikipedia is as simple as the name suggests: install some wiki software, say that it's for writing an encyclopedia, and *voila!* — problem solved. But as pretty much everyone who has tried has discovered, it isn't as simple as that.

Technology industry people tend to reduce web sites down to their technology: Wikipedia is simply an instance of wiki software, DailyKos just blog software, and Reddit just voting software. But these sites aren't just installations of software, there also communities of people.

Building a community is pretty tough; it requires just the right combination of technology and rules and people. And while it's been clear that communities are at the core of many of the most interesting things on the Internet, we're still at the very early stages of understanding what it is that makes them work.

But Wikipedia isn't even a typical community. Usually Internet communities are groups of people who come together to discuss something, like cryptography or the writing of a technical specification. Perhaps they meet in an IRC channel, a web forum, a newsgroup, or on a mailing list, but the focus is always something "out there", something outside the discussion itself.

But with Wikipedia, the goal is building Wikipedia. It's not a community set up to make some other thing, it's a community set up to make itself. And since Wikipedia was one of the first sites to do it, we know hardly anything about building communities like that.

Indeed, we know hardly anything about building software for that. Wiki software has been around for years — the first wiki was launched in 1995; Wikipedia wasn't started until 2001 — but it was always used like any other community, for discussing something else. It wasn't generally used for building wikis in themselves; indeed, it wasn't very good at doing that.

Wikipedia's real innovation was much more than simply starting a community to build an encyclopedia or using wiki software to do it. Wikipedia's real innovation was the idea of radical collaboration. Instead of having a small group of people work together, it invited the entire world to take part. Instead of assigning tasks, it let anyone work on whatever they wanted, whenever they felt like it. Instead of having someone be in charge, it let people sort things out for themselves. And yet it did all this towards creating a very specific product.

Even now, it's hard to think of anything else quite like it. Books have been co-authored, but usually only by two people. Large groups have written encyclopedias, but usually only by being assigned tasks. Software has been written by communities, but typically someone is in charge.

But if we take this definition, rather than wiki software, as the core of Wikipedia, then we see that other types of software are also forms of radical collaboration. Reddit, for example, is radical collaboration to build a news site: anyone can add or edit, nobody is in charge, and yet an interesting news site results. Freed from the notion that Wikipedia is simply about wiki software, one can even imagine new kinds of sites. What about a "debate wiki", where people argue about a question, but the outcome is a carefully-constructed discussion for others to read later, rather than a morass of bickering messages.

If we take radical collaboration as our core, then it becomes clear that extending Wikipedia's success doesn't simply mean installing more copies of wiki software for different tasks. It means figuring out the key principles that make radical collaboration work. What kinds of projects is it good for? How do you get them started? How do you keep them growing? What rules do you put in place? What software do you use?

These questions can't be answered from the armchair, of course. They require experimentation and study. And that, in turn, requires building a community around strong collaboration itself. It doesn't help us much if each person goes off and tries to start a wiki on their own. To learn what works and what doesn't, we need to share our experiences and be willing to test new things — new goals, new social structures, new software.

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